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WHAT IS MYSTICISM?

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WHAT IS MYSTICISM?

A STUDY OF MAN'S SEARCH FOR GOD

BY THE

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Set up and printed. Published April, 1923.

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"Mysticism has been the ferment of the faiths, the forerunner of spiritual liberty, the inaccessible refuge of the nobler heretics, the inspirer, through poetry, of countless youth who know no metaphysics, the teacher, through the devotional books, of the despairing, the comforter of those who are weary of finitude."

JOSIAH ROYCE.

"The Church can never get rid of the mystic spirit, nor should she attempt to do so, for it is in fact her life. It is another name for conscience, for freedom, for the right of the individual soul, for the grace and privilege of direct access to the Redeemer, for the presence of the Divine Spirit in the heart."

CHARLES BIGG.

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WHAT IS MYSTICISM?

I.

A DIFFICULT QUESTION

It is useless to try to define Mysticism. Like all deep and divine experiences it defies definition. One cannot define Love, nor prove God by a syllogism. But both love and God may be felt, experienced in our personal lives and the way to experience them may be explained. And when once we have discovered them, then we *know* and definition and proof are not needed.

Let us see, if we can arrive at an understanding of this much-misunderstood subject, not by defining it as a *thing*, but by describing it as a *life*.

Because Mysticism is not a religion but a method and a spirit, which is common to all religions. It is one of the forms by which man's incurably religious nature has always tried to ex-

press and to satisfy itself. So it can be traced in various degrees in almost every religion. It is not confined to Christianity. It is to be found in India and Persia, in Buddhism and Mohammedanism and is the same in all. Being only a method of attaining knowledge of, and union with, God, it varies only in the kind of God sought. But it is natural to Christians to feel that their Mysticism is the highest and best, the most interesting and helpful, because theirs is the seeking of the God revealed to us by and in Jesus Christ. On this conviction we shall proceed.

If Religion presupposes the longing of the human soul for God,—some God, some Higher Power, whoever He or It may be—then men have always sought out ways by which to satisfy this longing, to find the unknown God and to be at peace with Him. As St. Augustine expresses it, the human heart is restless and cannot find rest until it rests in God. And Mysticism is only one of the ways men have discovered and developed by which to find God and satisfy this longing.

II.

ITS PLACE IN RELIGION

In order to place Mysticism and understand it better it will be well to look at these other ways first. For they, like Mysticism have always been employed in every Religion and are used today in differing proportions by every section of the Christian Church. It would be an interesting study to distinguish each part of the Church by noting the predominance in it of one or more of these methods.

Speaking generally there are four ways by which men try to express their religious nature—their desire to know and serve God.

First, the Institutional, by membership in some clan, or cult, or church, claiming His authority, claiming to be the only avenue of approach, using elaborate ritual, which when properly performed draws the God down or lifts up the worshipper to Him. The connection with God thus made is largely mechanical, if not physical. Simply by being in the organization one is connected with God and may feel safe.

Secondly, there is the Intellectual approach—the attempt to draw near to God by the use of Reason, relying for salvation on the correctness of beliefs about God and framing these beliefs accurately in carefully drawn Creeds. God is thought of as "the great Intellectual Purist" and we must worship Him in truth, which is a matter of mental attitude. We connect with God through a chain of logical processes.

Thirdly, there is the way of the Will, the attainment of salvation as well as of knowledge by subjecting our wills to God's Will in a life of obedience and service. ("If any man willeth to to do his will, he shall know of the teaching") This is the ethical approach.

And then *lastly*, there is the way called Mysticism, another method, more inward and personal, called by Schuré, "The Art of finding God in one's self," and by Rufus Jones, "that type of religion which puts the emphasis on immediate awareness of relation with God, on direct and intimate consciousness of the divine Presence."[1]

This method of approach to God is, of course,

[1] Rufus M. Jones: Studies in Mystical Religion, p. xv.

seen predominantly in the Friends, or Quakers, though, like all the rest, it is found in all religions, as we have said, and in all varieties of Christian Churches.

Now it would seem that all these four ways, and perhaps others, were necessary to the complete expression of men's feeling after God, if haply they may find Him, as if all were methods by which God means to reach us or to have us reach Him.

But the claim is made, not only by the Mystics themselves, but by the critics, that this last way really comes first and underlies all the others. Not only the careful student but the Mystics themselves are glad to acknowledge the value of the other ways, and to accept their help and yet they claim that their way supplies personal loyalty to churchmanship and emotion to worship and data for the reason to work on and energy to the will and absolute inner certainty to all.

And further they claim that all men are not touched by an elaborate ritual, nor inspired by the thought of their common fellowship and safety in a great Catholic Church, though most of them

have remained loyal members of their respective churches.

And they claim that not all men can reason logically and theologically with sufficient accuracy to be sure of salvation that way. They are rather sceptical of the value of ratiocination and are too sure of God to need any logical proof of His existence, thinking of Him as Love and not as the subject of Logic.

And they claim also that the Ethical movement with all its desire to obey God's will, fails to do so without some inner aid; that mere obedience is an impossibility without emotional content and personal loving devotion. Yet they themselves are intensely practical and most of them very useful members of society.

So while not disparaging these other methods, thinking them good for some men always and for all men sometimes, they make the final claim that Mysticism, in some form, is universal and universally necessary. All of us, if we want God, can feel God touch our hearts and have personal communication with him. This is what the definitions we have given mean.

III.

THE DESIRE FOR GOD

All men want God. Religion, on its human side, is man's effort to find God. There is a sense of relationship, incomplete and unsatisfactory as yet, and we try to satisfy our incompleteness. The Mystic tells us that this satisfaction comes most completely, not by belonging to a Society, however great, not by going through a form of worship however beautiful; not by believing a dogma however true, but by feeling an inward and personal and intimate touch of God upon our soul. Because all our knowledge comes from the sense of touch, on eye or ear, and as God is Spirit and only Spirit with spirit can meet, unless God "touched our hearts," as we say, unless we can find and feel Him *within ourselves*, we cannot really have any first-hand knowledge of Him, only some knowledge of things *about* Him.

So that without really defining it we have now heard the Mystics claim that their way is preeminent over all other ways of finding God, that it is universal, for all men follow it in varying

degree and that all men actually use it to a certain extent.

What differentiates a Mystic from other men is only this: that he wants God more and takes more pains to find Him.

For the one fact that stares us in the face as we study the lives of the Mystics is that they all have a deep and over-mastering desire to attain to the vision of God and to become united with Him. This, as we have seen, is the root of all religion. The Mystic is only more intensely religious. He differs from the ordinary religious man, not in kind but in degree. That longing for God which is in us all, which makes us all religious to a certain extent, is with so many of us, just one of life's aims, side by side with many others, or something to be postponed to a more convenient season. With the Mystic it is his one ever-present, over-mastering impulse. It is this impulse which must be clearly understood and even felt in some degree before we can begin to study Mysticism. All follows from this. It is the ground of all mysticism in whatever religion we find it. It varies, as we have said, only in the kind of God with

whom union is sought. In the Sufi, it is the God of Mohammed, in the Buddhist it may be Nirvana or Dharmakaya with Plotinus it is a vague Abyss, while with St. Francis it is God personalized in Jesus Christ. With some who are "naturally religious," as we say, this longing comes from early childhood; others have led very worldly, even wicked lives and been suddenly touched by God's finger and "converted." However it comes it is the same in all. Many circumstances may combine to foster and intensify this longing. The world may shock by its wickedness and drive the pure soul in horror towards God. Pestilence and famine and earthquake and war may lead some to "seek a better country;" or it may be a sense of their own unworthiness and need for forgiveness. Whatever it may be and however it comes about, this yearning after God persists and becomes insistent and dominates and controls the Mystic. He cannot escape its urgency. It becomes not only a "dominant desire" but a domineering one. It is more than having a preference for God, it is having a passion for God.

Now life is always a thing of one aim and every man's life is determined by its one supreme desire. Whatever a man most cares for, guides and controls and moulds him. As we look at the men and women called Mystics, we find this fact true of all of them. However they may differ in other respects, (and they are a very varied tribe) they all so earnestly desire to get at God, so passionately seek His kingdom first, that really nothing else matters.

So the Mystic is set apart from other religious people in the first place by the intensity of this longing. It is only a matter of degree. For all of us have a desire for goodness and for God, only with some of us it is secondary and fitful and feeble. With the Mystic it is supreme and constant and overpowering. He has made his choice. It is God, or nothing, or rather it is God and with Him every thing else.

This statement hardly requires proof. The psalmist cries "As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living

God. When shall I come and appear before God?"[1]

The Mystics' writings are full of the same longing. That great poet of the Mystics, Ruysbroek says, "Here there begins an eternal hunger which shall never be satisfied. It is the yearning and inward aspiration of our faculty of love and our created spirit towards an uncreated Good. And as the spirit desires joy and is invited and constrained by God to partake of it, it is always longing to realize joy. Behold then the beginning of an eternal aspiration and of eternal efforts while our impotence is likewise eternal. These are the poorest of all men; for they are eager and greedy and they can never be satisfied."[2] And the old English Mystic, Richard Rolle, also a poet, writes in the same vein, "O sweet Jesu, I bind thy love in me with a knot unable to be loosed, seeking the treasure that I desire and longing I find, because I cease not to thirst for thee."[3]

In the quaintest and yet most striking simile, St. Catherine of Siena describes her yearning up-

[1] Psalm 42: 1, 2 and cf. Psalm 63: 1, 2.
[2] Maeterlinck: Ruysbroek and the Mystics, p. 147.
[3] Rolle: The Fire of Love, p. 165.

wards for God. She declares "I can no longer manage to live on in this life, because I feel as though I were in it like a cork under water."[4]

While still more beautifully Mother Julian of Norwich describes the longing which is having, and the having which longs for more.

"For I saw Him and sought Him; for we be now so blind and so unwise that we can never seek God until what time that He of His goodness showeth Him to us. And when we see aught of Him graciously, then are we stirred by the same grace to seek with great desire to see Him more blessedfully. And thus I saw Him and sought Him, I had Him and wanted Him, and this is and should be our common working in this life, as to my sight."[5]

In his earliest poem, Robert Browning, also a Mystic, tells us:—

"I have always had one lode-star; now
As I look back, I see that I have halted
Or hastened as I looked towards that star—
A need, a trust, a yearning after God."[6]

[4] Quoted in Von Hügel: The Mystical Element in Religion, Vol. I, page 275.
[5] Mother Julian: Revelations of Divine Love, p. 28.
[6] Browning: Pauline.

This then, is the first mark which distinguishes a Mystic. And the obvious thing to be said about it is that it is what all of us know we ought to feel and to be. It is nothing esoteric, nothing mysterious. It is only what every "professing Christian" professes to be his duty—to "seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness"—"to forsake all and follow," Christ.

IV.

ITS ASSUMPTIONS

What next differentiates the Mystic from the rest of us is the definiteness of his plan—his adoption of a certain means to attain his end. There is a Mystic Way, as it is called, a method to be pursued, an Art to be practiced. We are studying a Life,—vivid, earnest, practical and efficient, not a cold Science. It has its laws and rules, but it uses them for purposes of growth, not study. It is the actual life of the plant itself, not the science of Botany. But before we come to look at the Way, there are two of its assumptions which we must consider.

Of course it assumes God, just as Jesus Christ did. God is not to be proved, only sought and experienced. And the natural question arises *where* is God to be sought and where may He be found? Is He far above, enthroned in the Empyrean? or is He far behind, only to be read of in a Book? Neither. The Mystics remember that the Revealer said the Kingdom of God was *within* and so the Ruler must be there, too. One of the uncanonical sayings of Christ is very striking. He is said to have said "Verily, the Kingdom of God is within you and whosoever knoweth himself shall find it." It is in the depths of our own nature that we find God. As Santa Teresa says:—"You need not go to heaven to see God, or to regale yourself with God. Nor need you speak loud, as if He were far away. Nor need you cry for wings like a dove so as to fly to Him. Settle yourself in solitude, and you will come upon God in yourself. And then entreat Him as your Father and relate to him your troubles. Those who can in this manner shut themselves up in the little heaven of their own hearts, where He dwells who made heaven and earth, let them be sure that

they walk in the most excellent way: they lay their pipe right up to the fountain."[1]

Mother Julian writes "For God is never out of the soul in which He dwelleth blissfully without end."[2]

One of the early Church Fathers, Tertullian, asserts "To mount to God is to enter into one's self, for he who inwardly entereth and intimately penetrateth into himself, gets above and beyond himself and surely mounts up to God."

And this is repeated by Richard of St. Victor, in the middle ages, when he says: "If thou wishest to search out the deep things of God, search out the depths of thine own spirit."[3]

As Dr. Rufus M. Jones says, "It has been the contention of Mystics in all ages that God himself is the ground of the Soul, and in the depths of their being all men partake of one central divine Life."[4]

This is the very commonplace of Mysticism. It

[1] Whyte: Santa Teresa, page 49.
[2] Revelations of Divine Love, page 133.
[3] Richard of St. Victor: Benjamin Minor LXXV.
[4] Jones: Studies in Mystical Religion, p. xxxii.

ratifies Schuré's definition that it is "the Art of finding God in one's self."

They, therefore, waste no time in looking for God through telescope or microscope, they do not attempt to come near Him or care to prove His existence by logical processes. They want Him, —a close and personal and inward consciousness of His actual presence. They *know* He is actually within them.

This assumption comes from their knowledge of their real relationship to Him. They feel "capable" of God, because they have His nature and are His children in a real and not a legal sense. They feel that however they may have defaced His image they still bear it; that in their inmost selves there is a "spark," a "point," where they can connect with the source of their life. We see now what is meant by the definition of Mysticism as the "Art of finding God in one's self." The Mystic believes he can do so. This is the ground of His hope and the seat of his activity. And he believes more. He has a still greater assurance of success. He assumes, not only that he and God belong together, by an

inalienable right, that his longing is as justifiable as that of the long-lost son for his father's home, but that this longing is shared by God himself. He feels that God is seeking him even more earnestly than he seeks God. He knows that if he, in the far country, arises and goes home, his Father will run to meet him, even while he is afar off. Because the search is mutual, the finding is sure. In this assumption all Mystics agree. There is nothing mysterious here. It seems to be what is known among Christians as the Gospel. The only startling fact is that the Mystic believes and acts on it!

V.

THE MYSTIC WAY

We come then to the Mystic's Method of finding God. As we have seen, Mysticism is an Art. It is not a Science or a theory. It rests on certain facts and laws, even as Music and Architecture, but like these it must be practised to be of any use. It uses means, sometimes, as in other Arts, very dull and tiresome, like scales to the pianist.

The passion for the end ensures faithfulness in the use of the means and glorifies them. The ordinary Christian speaks of the necessity of "the Means of Grace," as he calls them, but his use of them is very objectless, the end is not always in sight, nor is his worship, his reading, his praying very intelligent or persistent. Now whatever men may say, our Mystics are very practical people. They may philosophize and attempt to explain themselves in very misty symbols; they may have strange visions and trances; they may spend many hours in silent and apparently profitless meditation but they know what they are about and are never led away from their one pursuit. This is surely the mark of a practical man even in the world's eyes. For a man of one supreme aim definitely followed is generally practical. So these Mystics set about gaining their end with the determination to use the best means and to use them faithfully. Without consultation among themselves and without the use of any text-book (save the Bible), they have arrived at a pretty general consensus as to what is the best way and so they use it to reach union with God, just as the

violinist knows what he must do, patiently and persistently to attain to virtuosity.

VI.

REPENTANCE

As we study the Mystic Way, it ought to have a strangely familiar look to well-informed Christians. It begins with Repentance. Their sin separates them from God. They are unfit for the sight of Him. Only the pure in heart can see God. So they, as all Christians, must repent, see themselves as they are, change their minds and endeavor to lead a new life. And the point to be noted here is that they regard sin, not as something deserving punishment and repentance as a means of escaping punishment. They are very little concerned with the question of their own salvation. As has been said, everything is swallowed up in the desire to see God and be at one with Him. And so sin is regarded as a veil, which hides God, as an obstacle in the way toward Him, something to be swept away to free their progress.

An old English mystical work "The Cell of Self-Knowledge" warns us thus:—"And wete

thou well that he that desireth to see God, him behoveth to cleanse his soul; the which is as a mirror in which all things are clearly seen when it is clean, and when the mirror is foul, then may not thou see nothing clearly within; and right so it is of thy soul when it is foul, neither thou knowest thyself nor God."[1]

Again we are told in one of the greatest of mystical writings; "Now be assured that no one can be enlightened unless he be first cleansed or purified and stripped."[2]

And so with them, as not with us, there is an intensity in their repentance and renunciation which sometimes jars on our susceptibilities. Just in proportion as they intensely long, so much the fiercer is their repudiation of the sin which hinders them. Thus they not only turn in horror from the sins they have committed and which have made made them what they are, they are also in great terror of the sins they may yet commit. They must do all in their power to subdue their lusts, their temper, their selfishness.

[1] The Cell of Self-Knowledge, p. 30.
[2] Theologia Germanica, p. 44 and cf. Suso, Eternal Wisdom, p. 132 and Life of the Blessed Henry Suso, p. 8.

It is here we begin to see, at the very outset, in many cases, how the over-mastering passion for God, in its hatred of sin causes, by its very eagerness, the exaggeration we call Asceticism. That is not the best name for it, because asceticism is the desire to please God by some self-denial, some self-mutilation. It considers the suffering as of some value in itself, the more for being self-inflicted. This the Mystic never does. He is only desperately in earnest. Little sins we pass over lightly bulk very large to him. Everything that stands in his way, however small it may be, must be put away. And so in his eagerness to get at God, he often strips himself of more than is needful. In his shame for sins past and in his dread of more sinning he inflicts upon his body too severe a punishment—not we must remember, to placate God but to further his progress to God. The difference between him and us today we may measure when we compare Heinrich Suso cutting into his flesh with a stylus over his heart the word JESU in letters an inch high, and some of us who wear a pectoral cross of gold inlaid with jewels. Both are symbols and both may be worn with the

same idea, yet while it hurt him more, Suso wore his with a joy deeper than ours.

And yet it was not in accordance with God's will as he learned afterwards. Just as St. Francis mauled and beat his body, "Brother Ass" as he called it, more than his tender heart would ever let him hurt a beast, just as Suso subjected himself to terrible and almost incredible austerities, so they both learned, the one too late, the other just in time, that such practices, so extreme and long-continued, only weaken the soul along with the body.

But while their means were wrong, their end was good. And it would seem by their results as if God rewarded their spirit and overlooked their mistake—as if He preferred, after all, this extreme method of reaching their end to the one most men take of the easy life and the pampered appetite.

At any rate in this first step of the Mystic Way, we can see in these strange and disgusting exaggerations, a still further sign, if one were needed, of the desperate eagerness to find God. Those

who have tried this path of pain tell us it is very rewarding.

It would seem that the Mystic's idea of renunciation, his ascetic ideal was like that of the devoted mother, who willingly endures hardships, of long-continued labor and loss of sleep in caring for a sick child, or like that of Peary or Scott in their search for the Poles. The suffering endured is not for itself, but for the end to be gained.

For instance, no one was more strict with herself than St. Catherine of Siena, yet she writes to her sister Damietta:—"Penance, to be sure, must be used as a tool, in due times and places, as need may be. If the flesh being too strong kicks against the spirit, penance takes the rod of discipline and places burdens enough on the flesh, that it may be more subdued. But if the body is weak, fallen into illness, the rule of discretion does not approve of such a method. Nay, not only should fasting be abandoned but flesh be eaten; if once a day is not enough, then four times. If one cannot stand up, let him stay on his bed; if he cannot kneel, let him sit or lie down, as he needs. This discretion demands. Therefore, it insists that

penance be treated as a means and not as a chief desire."[3]

With keen insight, St. John of the Cross says: "I am not speaking here of the absence of things, for absence is not detachment, if the desire remains—but of that detachment which consists in suppressing desire and avoiding pleasures. It is this that sets the soul free, even though possession may be still retained."[4] A fine but not unfruitful discrimination.

After all his austerities Heinrich Suso was taught a better way. He writes of himself, in the third person, as follows:—"At length after the Servitor had led from his eighteenth to his fortieth year a life of exercises according to the outer man and when his whole frame was now so worn and wasted that nothing remained for him except to die or leave off these exercises, he left them off; and God showed him that all this austerity and all these practises were nothing more than a good beginning and a breaking through his uncrushed, natural man and he saw that he must press on still

[3] St. Catherine of Siena: Letters, p. 148.
[4] St. John of the Cross: The Ascent of Mount Carmel, Book I, Chapter III, 4.

further in quite another way, if he wished to reach perfection."[5]

The sensible Englishman Walter Hilton, in his Ladder of Perfection, tells us: "that those corporal customs which men use in their beginning, are good, but they are but means and ways to lead a soul forward to perfection."[6]

But St. Catherine was right in warning of the dangers of unmitigated austerities. The weakened body revenges itself on the mind and then come visions and trances and hallucinations, some of them very beautiful and some not; some very helpful and enlightening and some quite the reverse. These are only by-products of Mysticism and have brought upon it much adverse criticism, being confounded with its essence. But these extravangances are not Mysticism however often they may come with it. Their presence or absence neither makes nor mars the true Mystic. "For I tell thee truly," says the author of The Cloud of Unknowing, with his

[5] Life of the Blessed Henry Suso, p. 64.
[6] Hilton: The Scale of Perfection, p. 179.

sturdy common-sense, "that the Devil hath his contemplatives as God hath his."[7]

These visions and trances are to be known by their fruits and the true Mystic knows how to judge them, if not always as keenly as Santa Teresa, yet generally with success. Santa Teresa, who had a delightful sense of humor, and an even more trenchant tongue, says, speaking of and to her nuns:—"The more they lose self-control the more do their feelings get possession of them, because the frame becomes more feeble. They fancy this is a trance and call it one, but I call it nonsense; it does nothing but waste their time and injure their health." And again, on the same subject, she says: "There are people, some of whom I have known, whose minds and imaginations are so active as to fancy they see whatever they think about, which is very dangerous."[8]

Similar passages may be found in many other mystical writings. It shows that the writers were alive to the fact that the mystical longing is strongest in emotional natures, in those sensitive souls

[7] The Cloud of Unknowing, p. 216.
[8] Santa Teresa: The Interior Castle, p. 88.

who feel everything more keenly than do more stolid people. And so for them, their austerities, their fastings and lonely vigils act more quickly and sometimes more disastrously. It is the neurotic temperament, so closely and so often allied with genius, that we perceive in many, though not in all, Mystics.

VII.

FINDING GOD WITHIN

These trances are also connected psychologically with the third step in the Mystic Way, (counting Longing as the first and then Repentance). This emerges here, although it is really a constant process, a daily exercise of the Mystics. It is called by them Contemplation, the attempt to concentrate their soul upon God. It is all in line with that intense initial and growing desire we have been harping on. Knowing, as we have seen, that God and they belong together and that God may be found within, in that part of their nature which most resembles God, they sink into that inmost self in silent contemplation, concentrate all their

powers within and there wait for God to reveal Himself. By this process and at that place, they get what our second definition calls for:—"Direct and intimate consciousness of the Divine Presence."

It is here that we come upon the very essence of Mysticism, that which makes it different from the other expressions of Religion we have already considered. Its description runs like a golden cord through all their writings.

Meister Eckart, the great German philosopher-mystic voices it clearly when he says: "The union of the soul with God is far more inward than that of the soul and body," and again, "The true union between God and the soul takes place in the little spark which is called the spirit of the soul."[1]

And these words from William Law, the English mystic are clear and forcible: "For this turning to the Light and Spirit of God within thee is thine only true turning unto God, there is no other way of finding Him but in that place where He dwelleth in thee. For though God be every-

[1] Inge: Light, Life and Love, p. 5.

where present, yet He is only present to thee in the deepest and most central part of thy soul. Thy natural sense cannot possess God, or unite thee to Him; nay, thine inward faculties of understanding, will and memory, can only reach after God, but cannot be the place of His habitation in thee. But there is a root, a depth within, from whence all these faculties come forth as lines from a centre, or as branches from the body of a tree. This depth is called the centre, the fund, or bottom of the soul. This depth is the unity, the eternity, I had almost said, the infinity, of thy soul, for it is so infinite that nothing can satisfy it or give it any rest but the Infinity of God."[2]

And to quote again from Mother Julian of Norwich, hear these words:—"God is nearer to us than our own souls, for he is ground in whom our soul standeth and he is mean that keepeth the substance and sense-nature together, so that they shall never dispart. For our soul sitteth in God in very rest and our soul standeth in God in very strength and our soul is kindly [naturally] rooted

[2] William Law: The Spirit of Prayer.

in God in endless love and, therefore, if we will have knowledge of our soul and communing and dalliance therewith, it behoveth to seek unto our Lord God, in Whom it is enclosed."[3]

Repentance and abstinence have been only means and preparations for this constant Recollection or Contemplation, this sinking into the inmost self. If they are at all fitted by these exercises, it is here they are rewarded and actually come into communion with the Father of Spirits and can speak with Him and what is more important still, hear Him speak.

It is the cultivation of this Art, the development of this inner form of communication which constitutes these people Mystics, whether asceticism precedes it or ecstasy accompanies it, or not.

And when we analyze the process, we find it is only Prayer, but prayer at its highest and best—the entering in to the closet and shutting the door—the praying in secret and without ceasing, something which transcends petition and even praise and which is best described by the words, Attention, Concentration, Silence, Receptivity.

[3] Mother Julian: Revelations of Divine Love, p. 135.

All Mystics spend much time in this exercise, because by it they find they draw nearer to God than by any other means. And the more they use this faculty, call it by whatever name you please, the more acute and sensitive it becomes. So does continual practise give keener observation to the artist's eye and nimbler touch to the pianist's finger. It is in this inmost studio that the Mystic strives for perfection in his Art.

They are not concerned to study its science, or explain its laws. They give no psychological explanation of their method. They are all simple-minded pragmatists. As Professor Royce says: "He gets his reality, not by thinking but by consulting the data of experience. He is not stupid. And he is trying very skilfully to be a pure empiricist. Indeed, I should maintain that the Mystics are the only thorough-going empiricists in the history of philosophy."[4]

They know only that doing what they do, the result they aim at follows. Their way, faithfully followed, does lead, not only toward, but to God and, as we have seen, that is all they want.

[4] Josiah Royce: The World and the Individual, Vol. I, p. 81.

VIII.

TRYING TO EXPLAIN

But to many of us who stand outside and study Mysticism critically, even if sympathetically, it is of interest to ask some questions here. Because only today do the researches of modern psychology promise some sort of an answer. Not yet can anything positive be assured us. Some day our natural curiosity will be satisfied and we shall know the laws of our spiritual nature, just as we are discovering more and more of the laws of physical nature. We might almost say that man's progress in knowledge has been steadily from the distant to the near, from the outward to the inward. His earliest science was astronomy, the telescope came before the microscope. So in religion the outlook was first to gods afar off. Men worshipped the planets and set up idols in temples. The idea of God's transcendence came before that of his immanence. And today our theology is becoming, like the Mystics, psychological. Our personal religion is developing an inti-

mate, unliturgical, contemplative side, which is proving, pragmatically, a very efficient help in realizing God's presence, a greater help than a noisy and elaborate ritual. And the tendency today is to ask "Why?" The Mystics do not tell us anywhere their complete answer to this question. They give us some hints, however, like these:—

"Now the created soul of man hath also two eyes. The one is the power of seeing into eternity, the other of seeing into time and the creatures, of perceiving how they differ from each other, as aforesaid, of giving life and needful things to the body, and ordering and governing it for the best. But these two eyes of the soul of man cannot both perform their work at once; but if the soul shall see with the right eye into eternity, then the left eye must close itself and refrain from working, and be as though it were dead. For if the left eye be fufilling its office as to outward things; that is, holding converse with time and the creatures; then must the right eye be hindered in its working; that is, in its contemplation. Therefore, whosoever will have the one

must let the other go; for 'no man can serve two masters.' "[1]

Jacob Boehme says even more clearly in his instructions to the young mystic: "When both thy intellect and will are quiet and passive to the expressions of the eternal Word and Spirit and when thy soul is winged up above that which is temporal, the outward senses and the imagination being locked up by holy abstraction, *then* the eternal Hearing, Seeing, and Speaking will be revealed in thee. Blessed art thou, therefore, if thou canst stand still from self-thinking and self-willing, and canst stop the whirl of thy imagination and senses."[2]

Molinos says the same: "Mystical Knowledge proceeds not from Wit but from Experience; it is not invented but proved; not read but received; and is, therefore, most secure and efficacious, of great help and plentiful in fruit. It enters not into the soul by the ears, nor by the continual reading of books, but by the abundant infusion of the Holy Spirit, whose Grace with most delight-

[1] "Theologia Germanica," Winkworth, p. 20.

[2] Jacob Boehme: Three Dialogues of the Supersensual Life, p. 14.

ful intimacy, is communicated to the meek and lowly."[3]

It will not be long before the researches of modern psychology will explain these vague hints. Already it has thrown much light through the studies of Starbuck and James and Coe and others upon the phenomena of Conversion and the different Varieties of Religious Experience. And the subject of Prayer has been studied psychologically by Pratt, and Streeter and Strong.[4]

Soon these aspects of the religious life will be taken up into the larger and more inclusive subject of Mysticism and both they and their inter-relation be better understood. It is not necessary, nor our purpose here to enter into the Why of Mysticism. We are studying it only as a fact of the religious life. But adding to the hints of the Mystics themselves, it may be well to put here, as pointing the way to a solution, these words from more modern authorities:—

[3] Molinos: The Spiritual Guide, p. 50.
[4] Starbuck: The Psychology of Religion.
James: The Varieties of Religious Experience.
Coe: The Spiritual Life.
Pratt: The Religious Consciousness.
Streeter et al.: Concerning Prayer.
Strong: The Psychology of Prayer.

"Beyond or underneath the usual course of the Christian Life there is in Mysticism the use and development of a faculty which works best when both mind and will are in abeyance and which seems to have the power of receiving intimations directly from God."[5]

No one has spoken more clearly on this debatable subject than Professor William James, who says: "Disregarding the over-beliefs and confining ourselves to what is common and generic, we have in the fact that the conscious person is continuous with a wider self through which saving experiences come, a positive content of religious experience, which it seems to me is literally and objectively true, as far as it goes."[6]

Many quotations could be given from modern writers regarding the religious use and value of this so-called Subconscious Self, but the subject is too intricate to be entered into here. Only these words from Evelyn Underhill in her important and exhaustive work called "Mysticism" may well be considered:—

[5] Addison: The Theory and Practice of Mysticism, p. 97.
[6] James: Varieties of Religious Experience, p. 515.

"Neither Conation nor Cognition—action nor thought—as performed by this surface mind, concerned as it is with natural existence and dominated by spatial conceptions is able to set up any relations with the Absolute or Transcendental World. Such action and thought deal wholly with material supplied directly or indirectly by the world of sense. The testimony of the Mystics, however, and of all persons possessing 'an instinct for the Absolute,' points to the existence of a farther faculty in man; an intuitive power which the circumstances of diurnal life tend to keep 'below the threshold' of his consciousness and which thus becomes one of the factors of his 'subliminal life.' This latent faculty is the primary agent of Mysticism and lives a 'substantial' life in touch with the real or transcendental world."[7]

IX.

THE HEIGHTS AND DEPTHS

A few more words are necessary before we leave this central point in the Mystic Way. We

[7] Underhill: Mysticism, p. 80.

have called it Prayer at its highest and best. We can give it no higher name. It is the retirement into one's self, the shutting out of the world's interests, the cessation of the mind's restless thinking, its doubts and fears; the silencing of even the soul's constant loquacity; the distinct expectation of finding God within and hearing God speak, if only we can be empty and silent enough to give Him a chance; the perfect repose of the soul, what an old English writer has called "our fiduciary recumbency," trusting the promises of God, that he who seeks finds, he who asks receives and that God is ready to meet us *within.* This is Mysticism and this is Prayer. Anyone who can succeed in reaching that state (for it is more a state than an act) removes the last barrier, pierces the last veil, may find his soul irradiated with the Vision of God, experience a sense of his presence, may almost reach to his goal of union with God and is lifted thereby into a joy which is inexpressible.

It is hard, however, for the soul to remain on the heights, there are alternations of elation and depression. The Way is neither short nor easy.

Like all good things, this greatest end of all, takes time and labour and patience to attain. We find these hills and valleys in our own lives. And many of the Mystics have had periods of great depression, sometimes long-continued and unrelieved. It is so dreadful they call it "The Dark Night of the Soul." They lose the sense of God's presence. They are oppressed by the fear that they are unforgiven. The old burden of sin returns. There is a sense of hopeless alienation. They cannot find God anywhere. Here again the Mystic misses God much more than we do, because he wants Him so much more. So his pain, when he feels himself alone is much greater than ours. Some sunnier natures, like St. Francis and Mother Julian seem to be spared this dark experience but few escape it. Heinrich Suso and Mme. Guyon seem to have suffered most. In his life (Chapter XXIII) Suso tells us what he went through. Three interior sufferings,—impious imaginations against the faith, inordinate sadness and the thought that it would never be well with his soul hereafter. But he closes the chapter thus: "After this terrible suffering had lasted about ten years,

all which time he never looked upon himself in any other light than as one damned, he went to the holy Master Eckart and made known to him his suffering. The holy man delivered him from it and thus set him free from the hell in which he had so long dwelt."[1]

So sooner or later this stage is passed and they come out of the dark tunnel into the broad light of day and then their joy is unbounded. The whole world is irradiated. They sing and laugh for joy. This goal to which they have pressed led on by "The Vision splendid," proves more glorious than they had dared to hope. At times, even in this life, they are permitted "to see the King in His beauty," and like St. Paul when he was caught up into the third heaven, they see and hear things which it is not lawful for them to utter. Sometimes they try to tell us, but they stammer and are forced to use similes and symbols that to us seem forced and extravagant.

Here again, to quote would be superfluous, the visions of God are so numerous. Only let Suso tell us of one—"It came to pass once, after the

[1] Life of the Blessed Henry Suso, p. 79.

time of his suffering was over, that early one morning he was surrounded in a vision by the heavenly spirits. Whereupon he sought one of the bright princes of heaven to show him the manner of God's secret dwelling in his soul. The Angel answered thus, 'Cast then, a joyous glance into thyself and see how God plays his play of love with thy loving soul.' He looked immediately and saw that his body over his heart was clear as crystal and that in the center of his heart was sitting tranquilly in lovely form, the Eternal Wisdom, beside whom there sat, full of heavenly longing, the Servitor's soul, which leaning lovingly towards God and encircled by God's arms and pressed close to his Divine Heart lay there entranced and drowned in love in the arms of the beloved God."[2]

X.

CAN WE REACH THE HEIGHT?

Must we part company here with the Mystics as they reach their goal? We who have felt the

[2] Life of the Blessed Henry Suso, p. 21.

longing, have tried their hard path of renunciation, who have meditated in silence and have waited for God to speak to us, must we be forever put off and look at the Mystics as people far above us and apart from us? I think not. We are blind to our privileges. Even today and among ordinary men and women the beatific vision has been revealed. The modern writers on religion tell us of many instances, especially does William James in his Varieties of Religious Experience. He tells of Lowell in Lowell's own words: "As I was speaking the whole system rose up before me like a vague destiny, looming from the Abyss. I never before so clearly felt the spirit of God in me and around me. The whole room seemed to be full of God. The air seemed to waver to and fro with the presence of Something, I knew not what. I spoke with the calmness and clearness of a prophet. I cannot tell you what this revelation was. I have not yet studied it enough. But I shall perfect it one day and then you shall hear it and acknowledge its grandeur."[1]

Other poets, like Wordsworth and Tennyson

[1] Letters of James Russell Lowell, I, p. 75.

have had the same experience. Wordsworth is speaking sober truth when he says:

"In such access of mind, in such high hour
Of visitation from the living God,
Thought was not; in enjoyment it expired.
No thanks he breathed, he proffered no request;
Rapt into still communion that transcends
The imperfect offices of prayer and praise,
His mind was a thanksgiving to the Power
That made him; it was blessedness and love."[2]

"May there not be" as Dr. Buckham says, "minor as well as major ecstasies, in which the soul receives not all the raptures of seraphic saintliness, but enough of the breath of the Spirit to waft it for a brief moment out upon the ocean of the Infinite where it is caught away from itself into communion with the Eternal?"[3]

But however incomprehensible may be the joys of a Mystic to the ordinary Christian, it must be plain from what has been said, that the way to them is a way open to us all. It is the common road. There is nothing vague or unreal about it. If it has mystery, it is only because it reaches

[2] Wordsworth: The Excursion.
[3] Buckham: Mysticism and Modern Life, p. 53.

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farther toward Infinity, toward the Being of God, the Source of our being. If we may not see to the bottom of the well, it is because it is deep and not because it is muddy. It is true that the intellect is balked by its simplicity. It deals so little with syllogisms. It uses a different faculty and has sometimes a little scorn for the Reason. Its knowledge comes by feeling, intuitively. Truth bears witness to itself and is its own authority. It is ready to reason upon the truth it feels but does not look to Reason for proof. It is not afraid of Reason but makes it the servant and helper of Faith. "That which makes us certain of the doctrine of the Trinity, and of all other doctrines peculiar to Christianity, is, in the last analysis, not rational demonstration, nor reliance on the infallibility of the Scriptures, or of the Church, but on that immediate consciousness which results from personal experience."[4]

XI.

THE MYSTICS ARE PRACTICAL PEOPLE

The Mystics are commonly supposed to be unpractical and useless dreamers, selfishly separ-

[4] Steenstra: The Being of God as Unity and Trinity, p. 165.

ating themselves from the world and of no use to society. It is one of the misunderstandings easily removed. Any one who will study their lives and words will find that while some, but only a few, are of that despised type, most of them have been helpers of their world and time. It is not fair to take the lonely searchers for God in cell or hermitage, St. Antony in the desert or St. Simeon Stylites on his column, selfishly seeking their own salvation, and make them the norm of the Mystic spirit. The true Mystic has always loved his brethren and felt that it was for their sake as well as for his own that he sanctified himself. The greatest of them, when they have drawn near to God by contemplation and have been rewarded by ecstasy, have come back from these states inspired with ardent zeal to help their fellows and with heightened moral enthusiasm. They are keenly touched by the evils in the world and are bent on removing them. They count labour as prayer and are ready for strenuous and heroic exertion. Many of them have been social workers, as we would call them today; others have been politicians, some even soldiers. St.

Francis of Assisi was one of the most potent influences in the early Middle Ages, upon Art and Feudalism and Charity. Eckhart was the greatest teacher of his day; Joan of Arc and General Gordon were quite successful as soldiers and leaders of men. Santa Teresa spent her life in reorganizing the discalced Carmelites; St. Catherine of Siena was the most statesman-like person in distracted Italy and made Popes do her bidding.

It is sufficient, to avoid making a long list, to advise the reading of the biographies of Mystics. The reader who now thinks them unpractical dreamers will be astonished to find them influencing the politics of State and Church, instituting great moral reforms, becoming missionaries and evangelists and crusaders. Florence Nightingale was a Mystic.

It would take too long to tell how they practised what they preached. But what they preached, at any rate, was like this. It is not only the English Mystics who are always practical, because English, as when Richard Rolle says:—"He is ever praying who is doing good," and Walter Hilton, who tells his anchoresses how to

behave when they are interrupted at prayer:—"If thou be wise thou shalt not leave God but thou shalt find Him and have Him and see Him in thy neighbor as well as in prayer, only in another manner."

In the same strain and in almost the same words, the German Mystics teach: "If I were not a priest," says Eckart, "but were living as a layman, I should take it as a great favour that I knew how to make shoes, and should try to make them better than any one else and would gladly earn my bread by the labour of my hands." And still more positively he says:—"Sloth often makes men eager to get free from work and set to contemplation, but no virtue is to be trusted until it has been put into practice." Again Ruysbroek, the great Flemish mystic writes thus:—"Interior consolation is of an inferior order to the act of love which renders service to the poor. Were you rapt in ecstasy like St. Peter or St. Paul or whomsoever you will and heard that some poor person was in want of a hot drink or other assistance, I should advise you to awake for a moment from your ecstasy to go to prepare the food. Leave

God for God; find Him, serve Him in His members, you will lose nothing by the exchange."[1]

And again from Spain, we hear the great organizer Santa Teresa telling her nuns:—

"Our Lord asks but two things of us: love for Him and for our neighbor; this is what we must strive to obtain. Let us try to do His will perfectly; then we shall be united to Him . . . I think the most certain sign that we keep these two commandments is that we have a genuine love for others. We cannot know whether we love God, although there may be strong reasons for thinking so, but there can be no doubt about whether we love our neighbor or no."[2]

XII.

NOT LOST BUT FOUND IN GOD

Another misconception which should be removed is the accusation that Mysticism is pantheistic; that it merges and submerges God in his world and by making Immanence supreme, does away with man's personality and even with God's. It

[1] Ruysbroek: Reflections from the Mirror of a Mystic, p. 54.
[2] Santa Teresa: The Interior Castle, p. 117.

is an easy accusation and perhaps a just one in the case of certain men who have tried to philosophize their deep experience of union with God. Their language is not always careful, nor their reasoning clear. The subject is too deep for them and they flounder when they try to express what they feel. But this fault, as in the case of the recluse, is true only of a few. While some express themselves extravagantly as Mme. Guyon, in her enthusiasm and ignorance of philosophical thought:—"And as the torrent, when it enters the sea, loses its own being in such a way that it retains nothing of it and takes that of the sea, or rather is taken out of itself to be lost in the sea, so the soul loses the human in order that it may lose itself in the divine, which becomes its being and its subsistence, not essentially, but mystically."[1]

And even Eckart, the scholar and philosopher says:—"God is nearer to me than I am to myself. He is just as near to wood and stone but they do not know it," which is no more startling than one of the uncanonical sayings attributed to Christ, "Raise the stone and there thou shall find

[1] Mme. Guyon: Spiritual Torrents, p. 194.

me; cleave the wood and there am I." Other Mystics, like Ruysbroek and Boehme carefully guard against anything really pantheistic, in such words as these: "To enjoy God without intermediary, this is what the spirit longs for, naturally and supernaturally with a supreme desire. But even if the divine union be effected without medium we must understand that God and the creature can never be confounded. Union can never become confusion. The distinction remains forever inviolable."[2]

The explanation of their difficulty, if any explanation is possible, is given by Boehme in this simile.

"I give you an earthly similitude of this. Behold a bright flame, possibly of *iron*, which of itself is dark and black. The fire so penetrateth and shineth through the iron that it giveth *light*. Now the iron does not *cease to be*; it is iron still; and the source (or property) of the fire *retaineth* its own propriety: it doth not take the iron into it, but it penetrateth (and shineth) through the iron; and it is iron then as well as before, *fire* in

[2] Ruysbroek: Reflections from the Mirror of a Mystic, p. 24.

itself, and so also is the source (or property) of the *fire.* In such a manner is the soul set in the Deity; the Deity penetrateth through the soul and dwelleth in the soul, yet the soul doth not comprehend the Deity, but the Deity comprehendeth the soul, but *doth not alter it* (from being a soul), but only giveth it the divine source (or property) of the majesty."[3]

XIII.

In conclusion it may be asserted with confidence that the Mystic, when stripped of all the non-essentials of his mysticism, of all the trappings and prejudices which have so long confused us, is not a man endowed with a peculiar spiritual faculty denied to most of us, but is a man like ourselves, with a yearning for God, like ours, only more intense, pursuing his end, an end open to us, by the patient use of means within the reach of any of us.

For Mysticism is not a mere opinion, not a philosophy, not even a religion, it is only a practical way of life, a development of a faculty we all

[3] Boehme: The Three-Fold Life of Man, p. 190.

possess, an Art to be practised, an End to be attained.

THE END.

A MESSAGE FROM A MODERN MYSTIC

"Many of the noblest souls have always felt, what they could not entirely describe even to themselves, such a mysterious union between their personal life and the deep spirit which works in all things, that they have known that the unit of their existence and their action was not the simple personality which in the tightest and most literal sense they called themselves, but was something more and greater. Just as the Body is not the Man, but the Body with the Soul flowing through it and filling it, so—such has been the thought of many of the greatest natures, the thought of which we have all caught sight in some moment of our lives—I am not merely this compact and single group of powers, pervaded with this consciousness of personality; I am all this, kept in communion with the heart of all things, fed by the spirit of the universal life.

Translate this floating, mystical persuasion into the terms of Religion, and it becomes the conviction that God and man are so near together, so belong to one another, that not a man by himself, but a man and God, is the true unit of being and power. The human will in such sympathetic submission to the divine will that the divine will may flow into it and fill it, yet never destroying its individuality; I so working under God, so working with God, that when the result stands forth I dare not claim it for my personal achievement; my thought filled with the thought of One who I know is different from me while He is unspeakably close to me, as the western sky tonight will be filled with sunset. Are not these consciousnesses of which all souls that have ever been truly religious have sometimes been aware? 'It seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us' wrote the Apostles to the brethren at Antioch. 'I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me,' wrote Paul to the Galatians. Who has not felt it? It was God and I, making one unit of power, that conquered my great temptation, that did my hard work, that solved my problem, that bore my disappointment.

Let me not say that it was God alone. That makes me a machine, and responsibility floats off like a cloud. Let me not say that it was I alone. That robs the work of depth and breadth and height, and limits it to what I know of my poor faculty. No! It was this active unity of God and me, His nature filling my nature with its power through my submissive will. It is not something unnatural. It is most natural. I do not truly realize myself until I become joined with, filled with Him.

This is the religious thought of character. I could not preach to you of character, of human selfhood and its great function, as I have preached to you today, and not carry it as high and deep as this. Men call it mystical and trancendental; they say it all sounds dreamlike to the majority of men. I confess that the objection weighs with me less and less. A thousand things seem dreamlike to the great majority of men which by and by are going to be known as the great moving powers of the world."[1]

[1] Phillips Brooks: Baccalaureate Sermon 1884.
(quoted in Allen: Life of Phillips Brooks, II, p. 543 ff.)

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